

Gesture and expectation in music

One of the key features of my philosophy of music is the idea of gesture. The simplest way to understand a musical gesture is to think of the difference between a letter, phoneme and a morpheme in language: A letter being the smallest unit of written language, phoneme the smallest unit of sound and a morpheme the smallest unit of meaning. We can divide music up in a very similar fashion: Between notes, motives (figures) and gestures.

By explaining gestures in this way I am making a subtle but distinct statement about the nature of the fundamental unit of musical meaning, what Phillip Tagg calls “musemes”. You see, a gesture is not musical in the usual sense of the word, a gesture doesn’t sound like anything at all. Instead, it feels like going forward, pulling back or simply staying still. Gestures are, in the words of Robert Hatten, “the energetic, significant shaping of time”.

A great demonstration of this can found in the classic skit on Beethoven’s 5th, a piece famous for being built almost entirely on a single four note motive:

<http://youtu.be/EEhF-7suDsM>

Beethoven is using the little note patterns to express gestures which in turn allows us to read meaning into the music. Each gesture being used here falls into one of the three basic categories (advancing, withdrawing or holding) and yet in the hands of a skilled composer an infinitely complex scene can be woven in the musical texture by using them.

The advantage of interpreting music in this way is that simple elements like gestures are perfect for doing logic with, and indeed gestures can be shown to perfectly logical in their interaction: When a musical phrase goes forward and is followed by another musical phrase that goes forward we cannot help but conclude that the combination of the two phrases will also go forward. In fact the logic of gestures is a little more complicated than this, but not so much that we need to concern ourselves with it here. So instead of music being some amorphous lump of feeling, it suddenly becomes a clear and distinct concatenation of unambiguous motions which move us to emotion not by some mysterious and inexplicable force, but by analogy to motion which we experience in our daily lives. Something which does not move much reminds of sadness because that is how we feel (and move) when we are depressed.

Unfortunately the story is a little more complex than just gestures, because the problem with things that are perfectly logical is that they are also perfectly (in the strict sense) meaningless. We cannot learn anything new by doing logic; we can only learn something that was already implied (again in the strict sense of entailment) by what we already knew. So while gestures explain how we perceive music and why we are moved by it in the basest sense, they don’t really explain why we experience music as meaningful and important. To understand that

aspect, we will need to investigate expectation and enculturation. Here I will call upon another old faithful of music history, Haydn's "Surprise" symphony:

<http://youtu.be/Uq78fAgTevs>

After listening to that one may simply dismiss it as a musical joke, the kind of thing Haydn was always fond of. But there is more than that going on. Why do we find that sudden chord a humorous but not frightening? Unsettling but not horrifying?

Let us see what Haydn has done: He draws us in with the simplest of simple melodies, the kind of melody a child might sing, but when the resolution approaches he jars us in a very particular way. This is not some random loud chord; it is a chord we would have expected to be a forward gesture in any case, to signal the continuation of the melody. So the surprise is not that it is loud, but that it is **VERY** loud, completely inappropriately so. This forces us to re-evaluate everything we have heard before; suddenly it wasn't a simple melody, but a ruse to lull us into a false complacency. What's more, he could do it again! And he does. But not often, just once or twice more, because he is not trying to make us scared, just trying to get us to sit up and wait for the next shock, and by the end the joke is that it never comes again. We have sat on the edge of our seat listening to a banal children's tune.

Compare this to another set of loud chords at unexpected times (from Stravinsky's "Rite of Spring"):

<http://youtu.be/zyLHlFa2nFI>

This piece is from Stravinsky's "Russian Primitivist" period, the loud chords are unsettling, and insistent. There is no way to reconcile them with what we have been culturally indoctrinated to expect, and they disturb us, even now after the effect has been rehashed to death by movie music for nigh on a century.

The originator of the theory of expectation in music was Leonard B. Meyer, and he focussed extensively of the cultural aspect of expectation. I would venture though that there is another, more subtle and vastly more effective (or should that be affective?) use of expectation.

All great composers do this to some extent, but the master of it was Bach. Listen, for example, to this extract from the Agnus Dei of the Mass in B minor:

<http://youtu.be/tdLCCQixNvg>

The particular note to pay attention to is the last note of the very first little figure and the last note of the text which it is later set to, the "lis" of "quit tolis". It feels like the note is too low, and indeed it is it "should" have been a D to fit into the harmony below. Bach plays with this "wrong note" figure throughout the piece, see if you can pick up each time he uses it in this form and when it becomes more insistent towards the end. Finally when Bach does resolve it properly at the end there can be no doubt what Bach meant by the piece, Bach is symbolizing the taking away of sin of that wrong note.

With Bach it is easy to read things into the music, but there can be little doubt that any careful listener can understand what is going here. What's more, this is not a culturally specific affect either; one needs no knowledge of the Roman rite or the Christian context to understand the basic gesture of redemption that Bach is making. I use the word gesture here deliberately of course, because I wish to highlight the parallel between the simple museme gesture we discussed spoke about earlier and the complex abstract concept gesture made in this moment.

Bach has taken an utterly mundane resolution of dissonance, something which so commonplace it hardly bears mentioning, and literally imbued it with infinite meaningfulness, a meaningfulness which the mere word "redemption" could hope to grasp.

If music is about anything at all, for me, this would be it.